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ABSTRACT

Traditional efforts to assess behavioral health needs in communities have relied on objective population characteristics to define need. Newer conceptual models must be developed that incorporate survey data into definitions of need. One preliminary model includes resident subjective perceptions of life changes in their personal and social environments. An analysis of survey data from 537 residents of 3 Arizona communities found that life events were significantly realted to psychological well-being, supporting the importance of life change measurement. The meaning and impact of life change may depend largely on its social context. A reanalysis of the tri-city data for a subsample (N=129) of residents 55 years or older revealed that life events which deviated from those of the respondents' age peers affected their well-being independently of more common events. The fit between residents and their social environment may be a significant component of well-being, which highlights the importance of including a social-ecological perspective in assessments of community needs. (Author)

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AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE IN NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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An Ecological Perspective in Needs Assessment[1]

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ABSTRACT

Traditional efforts to assess behavioral health needs in communities relied on objective characteristics of populations to define need. Newer conceptual models must be developed that incorporate survey data into definitions of need. One such preliminary model would include resident subjective perceptions of life changes occurring in their personal and social environment. An analysis of survey data from 537 residents of three Arizona communities supported the importance of life change measurement. However, the meaning and impact of life change may depend largely on the social context in which it occurs. A reanalysis of the Tri-City data for a subsample of residents 55 years or older found that life events that deviated from those of the respondent's age peers affected well-being independently of, and sometimes to a greater extent than more common events. The fit between residents and their social environment may be a significant component of well-being, which highlights the importance of including a social-ecological perspective in assessments of community needs.

[1]Paper presented at American Psychological Association Meetings, Montreal, September, 1980.

Charged with the responsibility of providing services to communities, behavioral health planning agencies must devise strategies for distributing often limited resources equitably within the service area. Ideally, such strategies are based on the level of need of residents in communities, with communities having needier residents receiving greater shares of the resources. The concept of need may refer to a state of emotional, psychological, or social deprivation manifested by such phenomena as psychological symptomatology, anti-social acts, self-destructive behavior, and direct requests for services. Need also may be affected by positive factors, often overlooked, as for example psycho-social resources (e.g., social support, coping skills), life satisfactions, and personal competencies (Jahoda, 1958; Smith, 1959; Zautra, Kochanowicz & Goodhart, in press). Positive resources may reduce need by alleviating psychological distress and providing alternative sources of assistance in the community for the troubled individual (Rappaport, 1977).

Behavioral health planning agencies seem to be turning more to objective, data-oriented approaches to decide on allocations of service resources (e.g., Zautra, Goodstein, & Goodhart, Note 1). Typically, information is available on a number of aspects of communities. For example, many behavioral health providers regularly collect data on their clients, and data gathered by state or federal agencies detail such community features as frequencies of births, deaths, marriages, divorces, arrests, crime rates, and suicides, to name a few. There is, in fact, often an abundance of objective information on communities should the behavioral health planner wish to use it. However, what are largely unavailable are

conceptual models for using these data to estimate need.

A common strategy of needs assessment is to employ demographic indicators such as marital status, income, and unemployment as surrogate measures of the psychological well-being of community residents (see Bell, 1966; Bloom, 1975; Rosen, Lawrence, Goldsmith, Windel, & Shambaugh, 1975). The most direct model for estimating need with these indicators is an additive one (Zautra & Goodhart, 1979). Scores reflecting percentages of divorced, umemployed, or economically disadvantaged residents are summed together in weighted formulas to identify target groups of community residents at higher risk for behavioral health problems.

This approach is limited in several respects, however. First, the correspondence between objective demographic indicators and subjectively-felt well-being is by no means certain (Campbell, 1976; Schneider, 1975). There is much to indicate that people's appraisals of their objective life circumstances may be at least as important as the circumstances themselves for determining well-being (Lazarus, 1967, 1968; Lazarus & Launier, 1978). Secondly, there is some evidence that the same objective indicator that predicts need in one community may not do so in another (cf. Wechsler & Pugh, 1967). The "fit" or congruence between characteristics of communities and characteristics of community residents may be a salient factor for well-being. The divorced, unemployed, or poor resident, for example, may be less in need if these are the features of the surrounding neighborhood or community.

Although demographic characteristics are important for understanding the social forces operating on community members (Zautra &

Simons, 1978), needs assessments must go beyond simply evaluating these aspects alone. To accomplish this, however, requires better conceptual models that guide research efforts and provide frameworks by which to interpret findings. This paper represents an effort to further the development of such conceptual frameworks, and discusses several components that should be incorporated into models of need. These pertain to (1) subjective evaluations of psychological well-being, and (2) ecological concerns regarding the fit between residents and their communities. Also, we will present examples from our own research in which we examined the utility of these components for predicting need among residents of a Tri-City area of Arizona.

Subjective Indicators of Well-Being

Recognizing the limits of objective indicators when used alone, needs assessments are beginning to survey community residents, asking them directly about their psychological well being (e.g, Watterson, Saravia, Zipsnis, & Braun, Note 2). These reports, or subjective indicators (Campbell, 1976) may examine such aspects of the life experience as happiness (Bradburn, 1969), life satisfaction (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Rodgers & Converse, 1975), and psychiatric distress (Langner, 1962). However, global assessments of well-being may depend predominantly on the kinds of life events that happen to community members. Major events like marriage, parenthood, and job loss (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), and minor occurrences like trouble with neighbors, traffic jams, and being with children (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer & Lazarus, in press) may be largely responsible for overall evaluations of life quality, and therefore

tied into need more directly.

As indicators of need, life events may be considered subjective for several reasons. First, while some events like marriage or death are verifiable from public records, other events like improvements in interpersonal relations and significant accomplishments rely on the individuals' perceptions as to whether they actually happened. The frequency with which life events occur may be related to well-being (Holmes & Masuda, 1974; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Secondly, an event's desirability cannot be completely determined by objective means. While some events may be sufficiently noxious to be negative to most individuals, most events depend on subjective appraisals as to their desirability. Even such "obviously" negative events like illness or bereavement may not necessarily be perceived as undesirable by individuals experiencing them (Neugarten, 1970). Reports of subjectively negative events have been consistently associated with greater distress (and presumably greater need), as measured by psychiatric symptomatology (e.g., Mueller, Edwards, & Yarvis, 1977), and behavioral indicators like traffic accidents and excessive drinking (Vinokur and Selzer, 1975).

Positive life events also may be important influences on well-being and need among community residents (Zautra & Simons, 1979). Positive events may signify the presence of psychological and social resources, such as social supports, personal competencies, and coping abilities. To the degree that supports and satisfactions can be found within one's self and environment, need may diminish, even if negative life events occur (Dean & Lin, 1977; Nuckolls, Cassell, & Kaplan, 1972). Positive events aggregated

for census tracts predicted need in communities, as measured by utilization rates of behavioral health services (Zautra & Simons, 1979). Interestingly, the absence of positive events in census tracts predicted more frequent requests for services.

Based on previous research, a model of well-being that incorporated the life events of community residents into its framework would include both positive and negative events. It would hold that negative events diminish psychological well-being, and correspondingly increase need. Positive events, in contrast, would be expected to augment well-being, and thereby decrease need.

The Tri-City Study

We examined this model of well-being using data from our survey of a portion of metropolitan Phoenix known as the Tri-City area. Our purpose was to determine whether positive and negative life events would, in fact, be related to psychological well-being and need. The survey was conducted with a probability sample (Sudman, 1976) of 537 individuals selected to represent the approximately 250,000 residents of the area. The surveyed group paralleled the highly diverse population of the area, and contained college students at a local university, surburban residents, members of a Mexican-American sub-community, and a large retirement population. Respondents were surveyed at home by trained interviewers. Interviews averaged one hour and fifteen minutes in length, and were completed by 85% of the originally selected sample.

Subjective information on life events were collected using a 64-item life events measure derived from the Social Readjustment Rating Schedule (SRRS)(Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Revisions of the original SRRS were made to clarify ambiguous items, add more positive events to tap satisfactions, and allow respondents to rate

the outcomes of events subjectively. The number of events with negative outcomes, suggesting adjustment problems, and the number of events with positive outcomes, signifying satisfactions and personal development, were used as subjective indicators of well-being and need.

Need itself was represented by four brief measures of psychological well-being administered to each respondent in addition to life events inventory. These consisted of the Psychiatric Screening Inventory (Langner, 1962) to assess psychological symptomatology, the Positive and Negative Affect Scales (Bradburn, 1969) to measure pleasant and unpleasant emotions, and a Perceived Quality of Life Scale (Andrews & Withey, 1976) to assess life satisfaction. Table 1 presents Pearson correlations between life events

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Insert Table 1 about here

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indicators and the criteria of need.

Life events were significantly related to psychological well-being. Greater numbers of undesirable life experiences seemed to increase the negative aspects and reduce the positive aspects of life. Greater numbers of positive events seemed to augment well-being, as indicated by increased reports of positive affects. Positive events also were related to psychiatric symptoms. One explanation for the finding proceeds from the view, espoused by Holmes and Rahe (1967), that all events, both positive and negative, are disruptive, and therefore detrimental to well-being. However, positive and negative events were significantly intercorrelated in the study ($r(525) = .22$, $p < .001$), suggesting the

alternative explanation that relations between positive events and distress may have resulted from the coincidental occurrence of negative events. With the effects of negative events controlled with partial correlations, associations between positive events and distress were reduced to nonsignificance, supporting the notion that positive events by themselves do not necessarily reduce well-being.

Information was available on service utilization within the Tri-City area, although not for participants of the survey. Independent data estimated percentages of residents within each census tract who had requested assistance from state funded programs during the previous year. To assess relations between service use and life events, scores on events were aggregated for census tracts. Significant Pearson correlations of -.27 and -.29 (p's < .01) were obtained between positive events and utilization of mental health and alcohol services, respectively. The results are consistent with those of Zautra and Simons (1979), who found the absence of positive events to predict service use in their community.

Thus the findings overall supported the utility of positive and negative life events as indicators of well-being and need. Predictions of well-being in communities would be enhanced by considering resident's own appraisals of their life experiences, arguing for the inclusion of subjective indicators into conceptual and empirical models of need.

The Social Context

Although subjective to a degree, people's life experiences none-

theless occur within a physical setting and a social context. Increasing attention is being given to the importance of ecological factors, that is, the physical and social environment, as influences on well-being (Catalano, 1979; Moos, 1976; Price, 1974). A central hypothesis from an ecological perspective is that well-being depends largely on the degree to which residents "fit" within their communities. Fit refers to the congruence between the "average background characteristics" (Moos, 1973) of the community and the personal characteristics of individuals within the community. This hypothesis has received conditional support. Person-environment fit was determined by assessing the match between resident's demographic characteristics and norms for the community or neighborhood. Residents who were incongruent tended to display more public expressions of distress, such as mental health admissions (Wechsler & Pugh, 1967), crime and delinquency (Quinney, 1971), and suicide attempts (Braucht, 1979).

The importance of ecological factors extends to positive and negative life events as well. Significant life experiences cannot be adequately understood without considering the social context in which they occur. Other individuals figure largely not only in the occurrence of events, but also in the interpretations and meanings that come to be attached to these experiences (Caplan, 1976; Cassel, 1975; Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). However, not everyone in the social environment may be equally influential. Instead, only certain individuals or reference groups serve as models by which people evaluate their own life experiences (Jones & Gerard, 1967, pp. 309-330). While many factors may decide the choice

of reference groups, age may be singularly important (Neugarten, 1977). People readily compare their experiences against norms for their age group to determine what is normal or expectable at a given point in life (Lowenthal, Thurnher, & Chiriboga, 1975; Neugarten, 1970). Also, the importance of age norms as guidelines for behavior seems to increase as people grow older (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980; Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965).

From an ecological perspective, the same life event may have a different impact on well-being depending on its congruence with events more typically experienced by one's age group. Events like marriage, parenthood, and job loss, for example, may have different meanings and effects at different stages. Even objectively undesirable events may not be detrimental to well-being if they fall within the normal range of experiences at a given age (Neugarten, 1970). For instance, death of spouse and physical illness were found to be more stressful for younger rather than older individuals (Baler & Golde, 1964; Parkes, 1964; Zarit & Kahn, 1975). People may be able to prepare better for stressors that can be anticipated (Lazarus, 1968). Also, to the degree that relevant others have shared similar experiences, they can offer guidance and understanding to the person in distress.

Whether positive or negative, events that fail to fit with age norms may diminish well-being. However, positive events may have the paradoxical impact of increasing psychological distress and promoting positive mental health at the same time. Distress may follow from such events because they could disrupt ongoing patterns of relationships between persons and their social networks. How-

ever, positive events also may represent significant personal accomplishments for which comparison with age norms may enhance feelings of satisfaction and happiness (Brickman & Campbell, 1971).

Models guiding community needs assessments, then, must not isolate persons from their social environments. Incorporating an ecological perspective, such models would propose that the congruence between the resident's life experiences and those of relevant others would strongly influence how these experiences are evaluated and come to affect well being. Need would be greater to the degree that the resident's life events, whether positive or negative, fail to match those of relevant others in the social environment. Need may be reduced somewhat, however, by significantly favorable experiences beyond those expected at a given point in life.

Tri-City Data

We examined the utility of including an ecological component into models of need in a reanalysis of data for community residents 55 years and older (n=129) from our Tri-City study. Specifically, we wished to see whether life experiences that were incongruent with those of a reference group of the resident's age peers affected well-being. Incongruent events were defined as experiences that deviated from those reported with greater frequency by the respondent's age peers. More frequently occurring events may constitute a normative psycho-social background against which residents determine the meaning and desirability of their own life experiences (Neugarten et al., 1965).

The modified SRRS life events inventory was used to construct a measure of incongruency for positive and negative events. First,

percentages of respondents who reported the occurrence of each event on the inventory were computed. Percentages were calculated separately for young-old respondents 55 to 64 years (n=54) and older community residents 65 years and over (n= 75). Second, each event was given a weight based on the percentage of respondents in the two age groups who reported its occurrence. Incrementally higher weights were given to events reported by proportionately fewer residents. The higher the weight, the more the event was considered incongruent for the age group. Finally, weighted events were summed to obtain scores on frequencies of incongruent positive and negative events, with event desirability determined a priori. Frequencies of unweighted positive and negative events also were computed to measure rates of events-in-general.

Dependent measures of well-being were, as before, the Psychiatric Screening Inventory of psychiatric symptoms, the Positive and Negative Affect Scales, and the Perceived Quality of Life measure of life satisfaction. Stepwise multiple regression procedures (Cohen & Cohen, 1975) examined the effects of incongruent events, with separate analyses conducted for young-old and older residents. To assess whether incongruent events affected well-being independently of rates of events alone, the unweighted events were entered first into regression equations to partial out their effects. Next, measures of incongruent events were added to determine whether these events predicted well-being over and above the previously entered variables. Results of the analyses are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

For young-old residents, number of events-in-general were not in themselves associated with well-being, but number of age-incongruent events were related to the criteria. More frequent occurrences of negative incongruent events appeared to reduce positive affects and raise levels of negative affects and psychiatric symptoms. In contrast, significant increases in positive affects and fewer symptoms corresponded to reports of positive incongruent events. For older respondents also, positive affects appeared to increase with reports of pleasant events that deviated from norms for the age group. Both negative events-in-general and negative age-incongruent events predicted distress for community members over 65 years of age, as manifested by greater unpleasant affects and psychiatric symptoms.

The findings from the reanalysis supported the notion that positive and negative events that deviated from those reported by the majority of the respondent's age peers may affect well-being independently of, and sometimes to a greater extent than positive and negative events in general. The original model of well-being suggested by our first analysis in which positive and negative life events were featured as a central focus, may be profitably expanded to include the social-ecological settings in which these events occur.

Discussion

The most salient feature of life events may be that they represent change in patterns of ongoing relations with the physical and social environment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Selye, 1956; Tache & Selye, 1978). After events occur, the person and her/his life

situation is never quite the same. From the need to understand and integrate life experiences into the cognitive structure, people evaluate life change in terms of its consequences for personal functioning, life style, and interpersonal relationships. To make these appraisals, however, requires some kind of reference point against which to compare one's experiences. Several such reference points may be used by community members, as suggested by our analyses of the Tri-City data. One standard of comparison consists of the resident's own previous life events (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). The use of this reference point is implicit in the model of well-being we presented first, in which positive events increased and negative events decreased well-being.

Subjectively, positive events represent "gains in state" over the prior life situation, since the state following the event would be viewed as better than the initial state (Parkes, 1971). In contrast, negative events represent "losses in state", since the end state would be perceived as worse than the situation before the event. Perceived gains and losses in such aspects as self-esteem, personal functioning, or interpersonal relations may significantly influence well-being, as the present findings indicated (see also Beck, 1971). Level of need also would be affected. Negative deviations from the prior state may signify the loss of valued material, personal, or social attributes and increase need. Positive deviations may signify gains in psychological and social resources. These resources may reduce need by combating life stresses, and by promoting well being in their own right.

Another standard of comparison by which to evaluate life change consists of life experiences of others in the social environment (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). That community residents use this

baseline for their own events is implied in an ecological perspective of well-being. Change that is congruent with the reference group may be perceived as part of the natural process of adaptation and succession in the community (Kelly, 1969). However, change that deviates from the reference group likely would be more stressful, since greater adjustment would be required in ongoing life patterns. Incongruent events furthermore may distance residents from the social network, leaving them without sufficient social information to guide behavior (Cassel, 1975), or resources to deal with environmental stressors (Nuckolls et al., 1972). Moreover, the absence of certain events, particularly positive ones, could be perceived as undesirable if such events were expected to occur for persons of like characteristics (Lowenthal et al., 1975).

The findings of the subsample of aging community residents in the Tri-City area support the importance of including an ecological perspective in models of need. Positive and negative events that differed from those of the majority of the respondent's age peers seemed to significantly affect well-being independently of life change in general. Positive events more favorable than anticipated for one's age contributed to well-being, while expectable positive occurrences did not. In addition, psychiatric distress was reduced for community members between 55 and 64 years who reported incongruent positive experiences, suggesting that these events may serve a preventative function at certain points in the life span.

Negative events more undesirable than expected at one's age level seemed to diminish well-being for both age groups. For resi-

dents over 65 years, both negative events in general and negative incongruent events diminished well-being, indicating that undesirable life change may be increasingly detrimental as one moves ahead on the life cycle. In later years, resources for coping with stressors may diminish (Eisdorfer & Wilkie, 1977), since social roles tend to be more limited, behavior less differentiated, and needs for dependency greater (Caudill, 1958). For young-old community members, only incongruent negative events seemed to reduce well-being. Perhaps this group may possess sufficient resources to cope with most stressors, except those that deviate appreciably from age-norms. In general, the findings failed to support the notion that negative events if expected may not be that stressful for older individuals (cf. Neugarten, 1970).

The findings, however, did support the importance of examining the social context in which life events occur, since events that are incongruent with the social environment may affect well-being independently of events in general. Community members evaluate change not only by observing movement in their own lives, but also by observing whether their social environments are moving along with them. Because the fit between one's own life change and the life changes of relevant others is a significant component of well-being, an ecological perspective would be important to include in assessments of community needs.

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Table 1

Pearson Correlations between Life Events Indicators and Criteria of Need

Criteria of Need	Positive Events	Negative Events
Psychological Well-Being		
Life Satisfaction	-	-.38
Positive Affect	.33	-.11
Negative Affect	.20	.33
Psychiatric Symptoms	.13	.35

Note: All coefficients shown have df = 516, $p < .05$

Table 2

Increase in Variance Explained by Events in General and by Incongruent Events for Two Age Groups

	Young-old (55-64 years)			Older (65 + years)		
	R^2inc[a]	F(df)	p<	R^2inc	F(df)	p<
Positive Affect						
Positive Events[b]	.06	3.9(1,52)	-	.04	3.1(1,73)	-
Negative Events	.02	1.6(1,51)	-	.04	3.3(1,72)	-
Positive Incongruent Events	.07	5.1(1,49)	.05	.05	4.3(1,71)	.05
Negative Incongruent Events	.06	4.1(1,50)	.05	.00	.5(1,70)	-
Negative Affect						
Positive Events	.02	1.1(1,52)	-	.01	.7(1,73)	-
Negative Events	.00	.0(1,51)	-	.06	4.6(1,72)	.05
Positive Incongruent Events	.04	2.9(1,49)	-	.04	3.2(1,71)	-
Negative Incongruent Events	.17	10.8(1,50)	.001	.07	6.1(1,70)	.02
Psychiatric Symptoms						
Positive Events	.01	.6(1,52)	-	.00	.2(1,73)	-
Negative Events	.00	.1(1,51)	-	.18	16.8(1,72)	.001
Positive Incongruent Events	.11	6.9(1,49)	.02	.01	1.0(1,70)	-
Negative Incongruent Events	.08	4.9(1,50)	.05	.09	9.6(1,71)	.005

[a] Increase in variance explained by each life events measure over that explained by variables already in the equation.

[b] Unweighted events were entered first followed by incongruent events in all equations.